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ABSTRACT

Embarrassment occurs when the social identity or "face" that one is trying to maintain is abruptly discredited. Thus, embarrassment usually assumes the presence of an audience, real or imagined, and a public predicament which changes the situation. Most people try to avoid embarrassment if they can, and if they have been embarrassed they will go to great lengths to restore their endangered identities, or "face." Embarrassment not only affects the embarrassed person or actor but also the audience that witnesses the loss of face. It is possible for the audience to become so involved with another's embarrassment as to even suggest the notion of "empathic embarrassment." There is still much to learn about this topic. Future investigations could profitably focus on two areas: investigating the role of both actor and audience in creating and managing embarrassment; and examining embarrassment in its relation to other social anxieties. For example, research has shown that people who believed they were about to be embarrassed became distressed; they became shy and presented in advance a less positive identity, indicating embarrassment blended into shyness. There is, then, one common denominator in research of this nature: the management of social identity. Whether the emphasis is on the actor or the situations which produce difficulties our focus is on managing smooth social interaction. (JAC)

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EMBARRASSMENT: SITUATIONAL SOCIAL ANXIETY

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Embarrassment: Situational Social Anxiety[1]

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Embarrassment is that uncomfortable state of mortification, abashment, awkwardness, and chagrin with which we are all familiar but for which we are usually ill-prepared. In fact, embarrassment does seem to usually spring upon us unexpectedly, without forewarning. In my presentation today, I'd like to elaborate on this and other conceptual considerations, describing what we know about embarrassment; I'll also tell you what subjects do when they are forewarned that they're about to be embarrassed.

Embarrassment occurs when the social identity or "face" that one is trying to maintain during an interaction is abruptly discredited, either through the emergence of information that the actor was trying to keep from her audience, or by the occurrence of some event from which it is hard to recover (cf. Goffman, 1956; Gross & Stone, 1964; Sattler, 1965). Somehow an actor fails to successfully manage an identity that he has tried to establish. Having said that, let me highlight two points: first, that embarrassment generally assumes the presence of some audience, real or imagined, to whom the actor feels he's presenting himself; and, second, that <u>something</u> has happened to cause the embarrassment--a public predicament has befallen the actor which changes the situation. Thus, embarrassment appears to be different from other social anxieties like shyness or stage fright in which a fear of even beginning an interaction is paramount. However, shyness and embarrassment are

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still very much related, an idea I'll return to shortly.

How do people react to embarrassment? Importantly, they try to avoid it if at all possible. Brown and Garland (1971; Brown, 1970; Garland & Brown, 1972) have shown in a series of studies that subjects will forego tangible profits in order to keep from being embarrassed. If they have an embarrassing secret that they don't want an audience to know, or if they are currently doing something embarrassing, subjects pay money to avoid an audience and discontinue interactions with others. Embarrassment is apparently an aversive state that we avoid if possible, even at cost to ourselves. Consider the plight of an actor in an old comedy who, having ripped his pants, goes to enormous lengths and great difficulty in order to keep anyone from finding out; he's so bound to avoid embarrassment that he causes himself more trouble than the embarrassment itself would have entailed. To a lesser degree, we may often act the same way.

If the damage is done and subjects <u>have</u> become embarrassed, they often try to salvage the situation by using remedial "facework" to restore their endangered identities. For instance, Modigliani (1971) and Apsler (1975) have both shown that embarrassed subjects try to overcome their predicament by somehow trying to make themselves look good, describing themselves positively or doing favors for the audience. Apsler's study was particularly interesting. He confronted embarrassed subjects with a request for help from an experimental confederate; the key was that the confederate had either witnessed the subject's embarrassment or was supposedly completely unaware of it. Embarrassed subjects helped more than unembarrassed subjects, and, curiously, they did so whether or not the recipient was aware of their prior predicament. These results are provocative because some writers (e.g., Goffman, 1956) have suggested that embarrassment is situationally specific,

affecting someone only in front of the immediate audience that has witnessed it. But Apsler's study suggests that embarrassment has broader effects than that, perhaps creating a general discomfort or concern for social identity that embarrassed individuals attempt to relieve, regardless of their present situation. So, if a newcomer joins a party just after we've suffered an embarrassing incident, our awkwardness and abashment probably does influence our interaction with the newcomer as well as with those who were already present.

Altogether, then, embarrassment clearly affects the behavior of those who suffer it. But, too specific a focus on the embarrassed individual himself obscures another vital point--that, as a breakdown in the safe, predictable flow of interaction, embarrassment can create a dilemma for everyone present. We don't know each other, you and I, but if I were to suddenly start hiccupping violently, flushing beet red, and ashamedly limping through the rest of my presentation, you might find it hard to remain unaffected by my predicament. If I become totally discombobulated, you might want to slink down in your seat and wish that you'd never been party to such a shambles. As I hope this example illustrates, it's my belief that embarrassment may affect not only the individual actor, but his or her audience as well.

Not long ago I (Miller, Note 1) conducted a study which examined the reactions of observers who witnessed another person's embarrassment. The observers were given instructions which directed them either to empathize with the actor or to simply watch dispassionately. I measured the observers' skin potentials and obtained their self-reports of mood during the actors' embarrassment, and found that it generally made them rather uncomfortable to watch another person make a fool of himself, particularly when they were asked to empathize with him. What's more, empathetic observers said that they, too, were embarrassed, and these self-reports of embarrassment were significantly

related to their autonomic reactions; their self-reports of other emotions were not. Thus, it is clearly possible for an audience to become very much involved with the embarrassment of another. We can even suggest the notion of "empathic embarrassment" as a label: that is, embarrassment felt for another even though one's own identity is not imperiled. Embarrassment is an omnibus phenomenon. The maintenance of identity in social interaction is such a central concern, but such a precarious undertaking that all participants in an interaction may be involved in avoiding or overcoming the embarrassment of a single actor.

We should note a final broad point about embarrassment. Although we're all prone to the pratfalls, faux pas, accidents, mistakes, and other disruptions that can cause embarrassment, we may differ with regard to how embarrassed we become as a result of such circumstances. In 1968 Modigliani developed an Embarrassability Scale to measure how strongly respondents would react to various social predicaments. He suggested at that time that high embarrassability results when one has a high sensitivity to the negative evaluations of others. Unfortunately, no one since has seemed to either use the scale, or to further investigate individual differences in susceptibility to embarrassment.

I have outlined what's known about embarrassment for you, but in only this brief time, I've still been able to allude to nearly every study that has specifically concerned the topic. There is still much to learn. In particular, field studies of how unconstrained actors and audiences actually react to potential and real embarrassment might be enormously fruitful. More can be done to study individual's susceptibilities and responses to embarrassment. In any case, I think that future investigations would be enhanced by the adoption of two strategies: first, whenever possible, explicit attention should be given to

the interactive roles of both actor and audience in creating and managing instances of embarrassment. To focus on merely one party is to overlook the situation that both parties create. Second, I believe that it could be unprofitable to try to draw too fine a distinction between embarrassment and other social anxieties. We're agreed that the distress that follows a social predicament is embarrassment; yet it turns out that if subjects are led to expect that they will soon be embarrassed, they also become distressed, reacting to the threat of embarrassment. That's clearly a social anxiety, but I'm not sure you can call it embarrassment.

Here's an example of what I mean. I recently conducted a study in which subjects were led to expect that they would perform a series of tasks before a hidden observer in an investigation of "impression formation." They had met a same-sex confederate, been assigned to the actor role in a rigged drawing, and seen the confederate ushered behind a one-way mirror. At that point they were randomly assigned to an embarrassed or unembarrassed condition and shown the tasks that they were to perform. For unembarrassed subjects, the tasks were mundane and trivial. However, for the embarrassed subjects, the tasks created a threat of embarrassment; subjects saw that they would soon dance to recorded music for 60 seconds, sing the "Star Spangled Banner," laugh for 30 seconds as if they'd heard a joke, and imitate a petulant five-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. When people do these things before an audience, they become embarrassed (cf. Apsler, 1975; Miller, Note 1). Prior to starting the tasks, however, they were asked to describe themselves to the observer by rating themselves on an adjective checklist. There were also asked to complete a short questionnaire for the experimenter, reporting their current feelings. In fact, after the questionnaires, subjects were debriefed and the tasks were never performed.

The manipulation worked. Subjects given the embarrassing tasks said that they expected to be more embarrassed and to enjoy the tasks less than did subjects given the unembarrassing tasks. But how did they describe themselves to their future audiences? I had hypothesized that subjects facing the threat of embarrassment would describe themselves more positively to the observers, trying to create a favorable impression that might minimize the impact of the embarrassing spectacle to come. However, to my surprise, these subjects described themselves less positively than did those not facing embarrassment, rating themselves - for instance - as less sympathetic, less approachable, harder to warm up to, more grouchy, defensive and selfish. Subjects laboring under the threat of embarrassment were simply less enthusiastic about the upcoming interaction and apparently resigned to coming off relatively poorly. In a word, you could say they were shy. Faced with a situation in which it was going to be difficult to manage a positive identity, these subjects set their expectations lower, presenting an identity - in advance - that was altogether less convivial.

So embarrassment blends into shyness when subjects are faced with the certain expectation of a predicament that has not yet occurred, and in many cases, shyness and embarrassment are probably more similar than they are different. I'm pleased to be part of a symposium like this one because it seems that there is an important common denominator underlying all this work: the management of social identity. Instead of making largely semantic distinctions between different self-presentational problems, it seems wiser to me to integrate our ideas and coordinate our efforts, all focusing on the difficulties inherent in managing smooth social interaction. Some of us may deal primarily with individual differences among actors, others, like myself, with the varying

situations that those actors face, but the essential fact that it is the combination of these two that creates our social lives should not be overlooked.

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